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THE CONGO QUESTION.

BY FELIX H. HUNICKE.

ANY one interested in the Congo Question will soon discover that the various writers upon that subject are either antagonistic to the existing situation in the Congo or that, with little qualification, they take the opposite view of the case. The reader who honestly seeks the truth, therefore, is naturally filled with uncertainty as to the actual state of affairs; and, unless he has the good fortune to enjoy an opportunity of personally visiting that distant region, he is apt to base his opinion in large measure upon the unfavorable representations which have for years been industriously disseminated in England and America—forgetful of the fact that descriptions of unrelieved gloom are seldom true to the facts. As a matter of fact, one need but travel a few hundred miles up the Congo River to be forced to concede that, whatever foundation there may have been for some of the grave charges against the Government of the Congo, it has accomplished wonders for the advancement of its domain, and that those who, in unmeasured terms, have brought indictment against Leopold's administration of his African dependency have overlooked or ignored the good that has been effected there and the marvellous progress that has been made in the development of a country which equals in extent one-third of the area of the United States. One who has had this experience may be pardoned if he does not give unquestioning credence to the indiscriminate criticisms which have been levelled against the administration of the Congo.

Less than five years ago, the route along the cataracts of the Lower Congo consumed thirty days of infinite toil and struggle over the almost insuperable barrier of the Crystal Mountains. To-day, a well-equipped narrow-gauge railroad covers this distance of 240 miles in two days, passenger-trains leaving both

terminals of the Matadi-Leopoldville Railroad three times a week. From Leopoldville fifty steamers ply the 1,200 miles to the foot of the cataracts above Stanleyville. From Stanleyville to Ponthierville there is a second railroad. At Ponthierville there are more Government steamers to continue the journey up the river. Another railroad is under construction on the Upper Congo, or Lualaba, that will in time reach Tanganyika Lake. Last year the final surveys of the railroad from Leopoldville to Katanga were completed, so that it may be presumed that actual construction will soon be begun.

Along the banks of the Congo or its tributaries there are a number of stations where the Government is experimenting with trees, vines and shrubs from all parts of the world. Seeds may be obtained by any one for the mere asking.

At every important point there is a well-appointed hospital. There are churches, schools and laboratories and well-constructed Government buildings. Vast tracts of the equatorial forest have been cleared, and the land has been planted in rubber, cocoa, coffee and other trees and vines, as well as with garden vegetables.

Yet all this tremendous area was, but thirty years ago, as stated by Dr. Charles Sarolea, of Edinburgh University:

"The darkest part of dark Africa, a blank on the map, a nightmare in the imagination of men, a zoological garden, a human shambles";

while now we find that, to quote from the same authority:

"Such is the security and peace which is already enjoyed over 1,000,000 square miles under the Congo flag that independent and solitary travellers, including ladies, have been able to travel from one end of the Congo to another with no protection but an umbrella."

Three instances which will fully corroborate this statement came under my personal observation. On board the European mail-steamer, on my voyage to the Congo, there were five Swedish missionaries, three of whom were ladies returning to their field of labor. On our arrival at Boma, all passengers were required to declare to the Customs authorities all revolvers, guns and ammunition, to pay duty on the same and to secure the customary permit to carry arms. These arms have to be delivered to the proper official, who, by means of a steel die, stamps on each a number which is then registered. Knowing that these missionaries had a seven days' caravan trip into the interior ahead of them, I expressed

surprise that they had failed to make this declaration, when they assured me that they had no use for firearms.

On the return voyage, we had a Canadian missionary who, with his sick wife, had made a ten days' caravan journey to one of the stations on the railroad, over every foot of which the lady had to be carried in a hammock. They, too, said they possessed no arms, although they had lived fifteen months in the interior, fully a hundred miles from the nearest white man.

The third case was that of an English missionary and his wife, who had spent twenty-five years travelling from village to village in the Congo, extending their trips into the bordering state of Portuguese Angola. Never in the Congo did they have cause to feel the necessity of firearms for personal protection. On the other hand, in Angola they met with such unfriendly receptions at the hands of some of the tribes that, in order to avoid a personal encounter, they were compelled to retrace their steps.

As I had read more or less about "the inhuman cruelty and butchery practised upon the natives" in the Congo Free State, I naturally discussed this question while I was in the Congo last summer with the American Consul-General at Boma, and with each of the six missionaries, one or another of whom from time to time I had the pleasure of meeting at the various places I visited. I was assured that there is now absolutely nothing to complain of. I observe that Professor Starr, of the Chicago University, in his book entitled "The Truth about the Congo," declares that he had the same experience in the previous year. Although some of the missionaries have been in the country twenty-five years and more, not one of them had personally witnessed any of the reputed cruelties—a fact which seems strange if these atrocities are plentiful and "still being perpetrated."

Those who have access to the few books which give accounts of these atrocities will find that the authors invariably describe the same cases (a very limited number indeed). Photographs are shown of natives whose hands or feet have been cut off for various alleged causes—amongst others, as a punishment for not producing sufficient rubber. It is a well-known fact that the cruelties formerly practised by the members of one tribe upon those of another beggar description. Prisoners of war were always tortured to death and eaten. Upon the death of a chief, his wives and slaves were thrown into the grave alive after their arms and legs

had been broken. Is it possible that some of the atrocities accredited to Leopold's agents may have been perpetrated by the natives themselves? On the other hand, if some of these agents did commit the acts charged against them, would that be adequate cause for condemning all the others or those who employed them?

The Antwerp steamer makes its first stop, after entering the mouth of the Congo, at Banana. As soon as the vessel comes to anchor, she is boarded by the Health Officer, the Customs Officer and the Company's Agent. Each comes out in his well-appointed gig, manned by four uniformed natives. As soon as the Health Officer leaves the ship endless native dugouts come alongside offering their various wares to the passengers on board. The trading is carried on as it is in any port in the world, the goods being paid for in coin. Ashore may be seen a number of Government buildings and some warehouses of the Dutch Trading Company, a very fair park and, somewhat further up the stream, a native village, where the natives may be seen in the market-place squatting behind their baskets of fruit, while others stroll from place to place to make such purchases as their means will permit. A similar scene may be witnessed at Freetown in the English Colony of Sierra Leone, only on a much larger scale. So, too, the writer has witnessed many Mexican and South-American villages where a like picture is presented. It is seen also at the capital, Boma, at Matadi and at Leopoldville. People bring their wares and dispose of them for money. In the streets, the natives wander about, some carrying bundles, others baskets, all chattering in their native tongue, and none showing any special evidence of "hopeless degradation or poverty" any more than may be found amongst the native Mexicans or South-Americans. The scene is picturesque in the extreme and very interesting. At Matadi, many of the natives greeted me with the friendly "*bote*," meaning "Good morning" or "How do you do?" in passing me on the street. At church I found a British missionary who, myself excepted, was the only white person present, the entire congregation consisting of native blacks; and all joined heartily in the singing, which was led by a black organist. A second British missionary church was visited, and amongst several hundred attendants there was not a sad or dejected face. All seemed happy, and all appeared to enter into the spirit of the singing. At the Swedish mission every one seemed contented and cheerful. A

party of natives, who had come to the pier at Matadi to meet some Catholic missionary fathers returning to the Congo, could not have welcomed their nearest and dearest kin with more affection than I saw them show to their spiritual teachers. Not one of these people is being driven into the forest to gather rubber or ivory, as I was led to believe from an article I read before going to the Congo.

Many missions number their congregations by the hundreds. The Government schools and mission schools are well attended, and most of them are in the hands of native instructors. A Protestant seminary is now being erected near Thysville, where some of the native converts are to be educated as missionaries, and, when proficient, these will be sent out to the more distant villages to preach the Gospel. Enough cannot be said of the excellent work that has been done by the missionaries. The difficulties and hardships these good men and women, both Catholic and Protestant, encounter, no one can appreciate who has not been in the field. As the Government assists the missions, it is but fair to consider that the work accomplished by them should, at least in part, be accredited to it, for without the Government's moral aid the missions would be utterly impossible.

Before King Leopold entered the Congo, the Arab slave raids were known to be as cruel, as barbarous and attended with as outrageous atrocities as the human mind can imagine. To-day, they have completely disappeared; so, too, have the intertribal wars which invariably culminated in wild cannibalistic orgies on the part of the victors. Now that this frightful slaughtering and mutilating and eating each other by the most degraded native races has been completely stamped out, it seems scarcely fair to accuse the Government of having failed to "provide for the protection of the native."

There are thirty-two professional judges in the Congo Free State, and these are assisted by twenty-five judicial agents. Any native who has a legitimate grievance can obtain justice by laying his case before a judge. To strike a native is a serious offence. Reference to the criminal records at Boma will prove that such Europeans as have forgotten themselves sufficiently to raise a hand against a native have paid the penalty for their act.

No European can engage the services of a native without securing a book for the latter in which the terms of the contract

must be entered, and in which entries must be made of all payments of salaries. Failure to comply with this law may be punished by imprisonment or heavy fine.

The standing army of the Congo Free State consists of 20,000 native troops under the command of European officers. These troops are stationed at the most important posts. Although polygamy is still practised amongst the natives, each soldier is allowed to have but one wife, who follows her husband wherever he may be ordered. During the seven years of service for which the men are enlisted, they are taught to care for themselves, to respect the laws of the land and to obey their superiors. They are quartered in better houses than they have ever before occupied, and they have occasion to observe and learn and adopt the customs and habits of Europeans. When their terms of enlistment have expired, they are returned to the villages whence they came, carrying with them new ideas and new habits which will, in time, have a civilizing influence upon their neighbors. The respect that the ordinary native has for the uniformed soldier is very great, and much of it remains with the man after he returns to civil life. Instead of looking upon this service as a thing to be dreaded, the natives are beginning to regard it as a privilege to serve with the colors; and they proudly exhibit their discharges to Europeans who may contemplate engaging their services. Of course it will take years—in fact, generations—for all these efforts on the part of the Government and missionaries to bear fruit. Nevertheless, the results are unquestionably apparent already. The following incident may substantiate this point:

I landed at the headquarters of the American Congo Company, one of the concessionary companies, on a Saturday forenoon. The next morning, being Sunday, after breakfast I was near the residence of the manager, when I heard the beating of a large drum. Upon inquiring what this meant, I was informed that it was the call to church in the native village, a few hundred yards distant and hidden from view by a clump of trees. Soon I was amazed to hear some of the good old-fashioned American hymns. There was no missionary at this post—in fact, no European who gave the matter any attention; and yet here were about twenty natives who had, at one time, attended some mission, and who surely must have been sufficiently influenced for the better when, on their own initiative, they held their primitive religious services

seated on logs, with the leaves and branches of some grand palms forming the roof of their chapel.

Before leaving the question as to whether or not reforms or any amelioration of the conditions of the natives have been effected during recent years, I will describe the conditions existing under the management of this particular concessionary company.

About one hundred natives are employed at headquarters. These men receive regular salaries, which are paid to them in cash, besides definite stipulated allowances in the form of food and supplies. Every Saturday the latter are served out to each individual for the coming week, and twice every month the men line up at the office to draw their pay. At the company's store, the men may purchase any article that suits their fancy. The principal labor performed by these employees is gathering wood, clearing the land, tending the live-stock, repairing and constructing buildings, handling the rubber and ivory which have been purchased and preparing the same for shipment to Antwerp, loading these products on the boat, and carrying the supplies coming from Europe from the boat to the warehouses—besides such minor duties as are universally required from servants employed in the homes of the resident manager and his assistant. Not one of these men or women is required to leave the post to travel for days into the forest to gather rubber for the Government.

It may be asked: How does this concessionary company secure its rubber and ivory? This, too, I can explain fully, having personally witnessed and even photographed the various stages of the transaction. The first indication of the approach of a trading caravan towards the post is a long-drawn-out "toot," resembling a deep steam whistle during a foggy morning on the Hudson. This is heard repeatedly. Finally a boy or young man, wielding the horn—which is made out of a young elephant's tusk—emerges from the high grass. He is followed, in single file, by the head man, then by the Chief and then by the various individuals constituting the caravan. As a rule, the carriers halt at the company's store, while the Chief and the head man proceed to the manager's office, where the head man, after saluting, explains in the native dialect the object of the call. Thereupon the Chief and the head man—who, to a great extent, seems to fill the office of interpreter—approach the Europeans and shake hands with each and every one, a ceremony that is always carried out with

great dignity. The preliminaries having been satisfactorily settled, those present proceed to the store, the Chief directing his followers to unpack their rubber, the Europeans preparing to receive it. As each native delivers the rubber he has brought, it is weighed in the presence of the Chief and the head man; then a slip of paper is handed to him on which the weight of the rubber is noted. Should the rubber be unnecessarily dirty, it is not accepted. After all the rubber has been weighed and turned in to the storekeeper, each native, in succession, enters the store and selects the cloth or article he desires. Should the value of the article exceed the value of the rubber, his request is refused; and, if it is below that value, he is given additional cloth or some other merchandise that will strictly and honestly balance the account. The manager's instructions are to offer coin in payment for the rubber and ivory. This was done in my presence, but it was invariably refused by the native. Only those natives who are in close touch with the Europeans know the value of money. In time, the others will undoubtedly learn to appreciate the advantages of a universal medium of exchange.

Where do the natives get the rubber and ivory they bring to the post? In the forests and in the fields. It is argued that these belong to the concessionary company. So they do; but how is the company to secure the rubber unless the native gathers it? The conditions differ not one iota from those existing all over the world. The man who desires to gratify his needs or wants must, in order to secure the wherewithal, give in return an equivalent value in the form of labor, coin or commodity. On this particular concession, the Government has not compelled one single soul to collect, on its account, one ounce of rubber during the past two years.

I have recently seen the contemplated transfer of the Congo Free State described as an amazing spectacle of one man deeding away, as his goods and chattels, the persons, liberties and property of 15,000,000 people, and a region nearly 1,000,000 square miles in extent. How does this transaction differ from the Louisiana Purchase, or the purchase of Alaska, or of the Philippines? Leopold, King of the Congo Free State, one man, deeds the Congo Free State to Belgium; in 1803, Napoleon, Emperor of France, again one man, deeded the territory known as the "Louisiana Purchase" to the United States, which is spoken of in a standard history as

"the largest transaction in real estate the world has ever known"; in 1867, the Tsar of Russia, once more one man, deeded Alaska to the United States; and finally, in 1899, the Queen of Spain deeded the Philippine Islands to the United States.

As the last-named transfer was effected but ten years ago, the facts in the case are still fresh in the minds of most Americans. I do not recall that President McKinley took any steps to ascertain the wishes of the Filipinos. Strange to say, the latter did raise some objections, and these did not subside until American soldiers used the ever-persuasive argument that, from time immemorial, has proven effective.

We have, therefore, three specific instances in the history of our own country in which the amazing spectacle was offered of one individual deeding to us, for a consideration, as "goods and chattels," millions of square miles of territory and the persons, liberties and property of millions of people.

Article I of the Treaty arranging for the annexation of the Congo to Belgium provides that Belgium shall respect the existing foundations in the Congo.

In all civilized countries of the world a contract is respected. In order to make it perfectly clear that the provision in the Treaty of Annexation was absolutely necessary to carry out the agreements previously entered into with the concessionary companies, I quote such clauses as bear on the subject from the contract between the Congo Free State and the company I have referred to.

"Article I.—The Congo Free State grants to said Company the right, during the period of sixty years dating from the signing of this instrument, to gather rubber and other vegetable products in the territories comprised in the following limits, marked on the appended map."

A description of the boundaries of the territory in question is given in detail, and the succeeding paragraph reads:

"The *lands owned by the natives*, private property, and the lands constituting part of the public domain of the State that may be located in these areas, will *not* be included in the concession. The rights of the party of the second part shall be subject to public or private rights now existing, and to those which may be decreed by the laws of the State. The latter reserves particularly the right, for itself, as well as the right to grant to private individuals the power, to construct waterways in the neighboring forests, to cut wood for the purpose of fuel to make steam and to store the same at posts. Stations for this purpose may be established."

"Article IV.—The party of the second part shall have the right to build roads and all other means of communication and of transport, in the concession, *subject to agreement*, if such be the case, *with the natives*, or with third parties *who have private rights to the land*, necessary for the establishment of such ways."

In the first place, the concession granted to this company does not convey one foot of ground: the vast areas granted to it *cannot*, therefore, continue in the possession of this company.

In the second place, any lands owned by the natives located within the confines of the concession are not included in the grant to gather rubber. Therefore, the native is not merely the actual possessor of his land, but he and he alone has the right to all its products. These rights have been scrupulously respected.

In the State of Texas the "school lands" are leased to cattle-owners for grazing purposes. A rubber-bearing shrub, known as "guayule," grows on some of these lands. About five years ago, when "guayule" suddenly sprang into prominence in Mexico, the lessees of the Texas school lands decided to reap a rich harvest by selling the shrub existing on the lands they had leased from the State. To their surprise, the School Commissioners of the State ruled that this was illegal, and the Legislature sustained their decision.

The Texas grazing lease is very similar to the rubber-gathering concession of the Congo Free State. In the former case, the lessee may graze his cattle on the lands, but he cannot gather the rubber; while, in the latter case, the concessionary company may gather the rubber, but cannot appropriate any other product such as coal, ore and timber found on the concession.

It is difficult to understand how the native is kept out of the possession of the produce of the land because of the existence of this concession. What possible benefit would he derive from the actual possession of any additional lands? If he cares to exploit any given number of acres of land, what is there to hinder him from doing so? I have not seen one native who, on his own initiative, cultivated any land except such small patches as sufficed to provide for his needs, and even these he himself does not work as long as he has a wife to do it for him. The men will gather the tree and vine rubber, but they will not work the soil. In the case of the grass rubber the men may gather the roots, but the women and children must pound the rubber out.

If the native needs powder or salt or cloth, he will gather rubber; this he brings to the post to exchange for the articles needed. Having satisfied his wants, he does nothing but live in idleness until such time as his supplies are again exhausted. There is nothing compulsory about the rubber-gathering; and, on the concession referred to above, the only tax known is the one paid by the company to the Government.

The French Congo has been so completely partitioned out amongst concessionary companies that not ten per cent. of its territory remains in the hands of the Government. The only village of importance in this vast colony is Brazzaville, which is located on Stanley Pool opposite to Leopoldville. The improvements made by the Government are so few that they hardly deserve mention. All supplies destined for the French Congo are brought to Brazzaville on the Matadi-Leopoldville Railroad. Thus, were it not for the transportation facilities established by Leopold, the French Colony would be practically inaccessible. In the same manner, many of the products of the British and German colonies east of the Congo Free State can be shipped to the European markets only by way of the excellent facilities Leopold has established in his domain.

What has been done by the European countries which own these African colonies to warrant the belief that they are more fitted to govern the parts of the Congo Free State that might be allotted to them in case the latter State is partitioned out amongst them than is Leopold to-day? What benefits have the natives in those colonies ever derived from the fact that they are living under the English, French, German or Portuguese flags? As long as the Congo is a colony of a "neutral" State, there is reason to believe that there will be no conflicting interests amongst the colonies of the other European Powers. The very act of partitioning the Congo amongst four Powers would bring about a situation almost sure to lead to difficulties.

France, Germany and Portugal are satisfied to permit the *status quo* to continue. Then why this strenuous effort on the part of England in behalf of the Congolese? Does England need the Congo so that her Cape to Cairo railroad may traverse none but British territory?

FELIX H. HUNICKE.